East Sussex Local Government Reform

Public Focus Groups Write-Up

Summary

Most participants were open to the idea of a Unitary Authority, recognising possible benefits such as clearer accountability, better services, and cost savings. However, there were strong concerns about losing local identity, having less say in decisions, and reduced access to services under a more centralised system. These concerns often related to the size of the new authority, rather than a debate about whether or not a Unitary was appropriate.

There were varied views on any potential new boundaries. The only overarching consensus was that the people did not want to be joined with Brighton and Hove. Otherwise, the rural/coastal split and current East Sussex footprint (either as a normal Council or a Federated model) where most popular.

Hopes and Fears

Participants expressed hopes and fears about reforming local government in East Sussex. Below is a summary of key themes, showing where people saw potential benefits and where they raised concerns.

Clarity and Transparency

Many people hoped the reforms would reduce confusion about which council is responsible for what. Currently, residents feel "passed between" different levels of government without clear answers. A single unitary authority could make responsibilities easier to understand and improve transparency.

"No overlapping of roles and responsibilities"

However, we also heard concern about how the new Unitary would work with the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), with a request for more clarity on how they would work together to ensure transparency.

People also talked about the role of Town and Parish Councils in the new model. Some felt they could be given more responsibilities and powers (they close the gap between Unitary and local). We heard from other people who questioned what their current role was.

Financial Impact

There was hope that the creation of a single Unitary Authority would result in cost savings.

"Cost saving through less duplication – e.g. shared HR, admin, finance functions."
"Good value – if duplication is removed and resources reassigned."

People expressed concerns about the ability to realise this cost savings, both in terms of the potentially significant cost of the transition itself and the ability to make savings over the longer-term.

'That the re-org will cost a fortune and fail'.

People also talked about how it would impact where money was spent and how any savings would be made. For example, people expressed concern around the sale of local assets and the redirection of discretionary spend to statutory services.

"Budgets being pooled leads to social care taking all the money"

Overall, there was a feeling that this change will not resolve the financial challenges in local government.

Services and Outcomes

People wanted the change to have a positive impact on the things that they care about. From holistic person-centred services, economic growth, being able to walk round safely, better funding for schools, hospitals, roads, through to environmental protection.

The increased ability to join-up services and create a long-term strategic view were particularly highlighted.

"Better partnership between adult social care, housing and environmental health to improve outcomes"

While many could see the opportunity, there were significant questions about how this change would actually make a difference to the things that mattered to them.

"I fear that local services will be further cut back in this exercise e.g. pest control"

"Our landscapes are needing help. Will a bigger authority be more cohesive in their conservation policy"

People expressed a desire for change and improvement. Some expressed a view that this is "*Just arranging the deckchairs*" rather than dealing with fundamental issues. With some suggesting this as an opportunity to "*reimagine the services of the future*".

People also questioned what would happen to local assets and services where there had been a difference in views between the County Council and D&B in the past. For example, they talked about a swimming pool being closed by County and reopened by the local council.

People were worried that a large organisation would be less responsive and accessible. They talked about not being able to walk into the local government offices to get issues resolved and difficulty in communicating, with potentially slower response times.

This was also raised when thinking about partnership working. For example, we heard about a charity with strong links and joint working with the local authority because they were 'next door', but other charities doing similar roles in other areas of the district not having these close links. People requested that 'there needs to be a strong focus on localities'.

Local Democracy and Decision Making

Some participants expressed optimism that councillors could have more power, attracting more people to the role and making the position more meaningful and effective.

'Better quality councillors because they have more power'

There was also hope that a Unitary model would enable more to be done, as there would be less political division between D&B and County Council.

'At the moment local & county council are hampered by political ideology resulting in often no action. I am hopeful that a change in structure will benefit all'

People also welcomed the devolution of some powers from central government.

'Should produce and deliver more effective projects, infrastructure in the area, due to less hurdles to jump through for Mayoral Authority'.

However, many expressed concerns that these changes would result in an erosion of local democracy.

People felt Councillors now are local people, with knowledge and connections in the local area, and are accessible to them. There was a concern that in the future Councillors would have to represent a larger number of people, making them more remote and less accessible. One focus groups specifically asked that Councillors should still cover the same number of people as the current D&B Councillors.

Some also expressed concerns that it would lead to a reduction in independent Councillors and a reduction in "political spread".

There were different opinions on what the future of decision making should look like. Some hoped more "Decisions based on metrics" while others worried about "spreadsheet decisions not people decisions" and decision being taken top-down, without local knowledge e.g. "'Force fed planning decision'".

Influence and Identity

People were worried about being joined with larger areas. For example, how to ensure small populations in rural areas have their voices heard compared to larger towns, or towns raising concerns about being grouped with even larger towns or cities such as Brighton.

"Getting lost when competing with bigger towns in the county"

This was also reflected in specific issues.

"Eastbourne, Bexhill, Hastings - tourist economy lost in East Sussex".

People expressed concern that this could increase competition and inequality between areas.

People were worried about the erosion of identity and their areas uniqueness. They typically identified with smaller geographical areas. It was the clubs, churches, neighbours, community groups and local landmarks, that were the most important to people. They expressed concern about how this would change. For example, people talked about *"The loss of Rother's identity"* and *"Not sure if I want to be in one melting pot"*.

Transition

There were a range of concerns raised about the transition:

- Legitimacy – people were not informed of these potential changes before voting in the general election.
- Who was consulted - People felt that this was a significant change and that many more people needed to be involved in the consultation, with a wider range of people being reached. Some suggested that people should have a vote on the changes.
- Speed - There was a feeling that this is being 'rushed through'. That the pace of change should be slowed down and that East Sussex should defer and come off the priority programme.
- Sustainability - Questions were raised on whether central government will change its mind.
- Loss of local knowledge – Staff and Councillors with extensive local knowledge leaving during the transition.
- The change will fail – People gave examples of local changes to integrate which they perceived to have failed.

Geographies and Boundaries

Some people felt there was not sufficient information about the purpose of the new unitary to be able to make an informed decision i.e. form should follow function. Others felt there just wasn't enough information or time to consider in full. However, the points below related to those who did share an opinion.

There was a clear and widely held view among participants that they did not want to be joined with Brighton and Hove.

"How can a restructure with Brighton and Hove not become Brighton centric".

The only consideration was how to benefit from and align with Brighton and Hove economic growth.

The discussion on boundaries varied between focus groups, with some groups developing potential ideas; some reviewing existing proposals (e.g. Hastings); and some having a broader discussion which related more to the hope and fears.

The options below were covered in one or more of the focus groups.

Option	Perceived benefits	Perceived drawbacks
Rural/Coastal or North/South split of East Sussex	Smaller area, shared identity and challenges. "Authority footprint over area with needs and ambitions in common"	People questioned if this would mean they wouldn't have a say on what happens in the other area. To note: when talking about identity, people on the coast valued the rural areas and vice versa.
Current East Sussex Footprint	Less disruptive than other models. Some felt it should be the presumed model unless the business case was able to make a strong case for an alternative approach.	Others felt the current County Council did not work well for them and saw this as more of the same, while losing their local voice.
Split into three across West and East Sussex (i.e. West, Central/Mid and East).	Limited number of people identified with 'Central' or 'Mid-Sussex.	Others felt it was an arbitrary split.
Federated Model (Hastings only)	Achieve efficiencies while keeping identity and voice of local areas.	
Whole Sussex model		Discounted as too large an area
Split East and West Sussex into four (North West, North East, South West and South East)	Not sufficiently discussed to draw out key benefits and drawbacks.	

There were also some comments about going back to how things were split up before, but this was not elaborated on.

As highlighted above, not everyone expressed a clear preference. However, the feeling of those that did clearly express a view were as follows:

Area	View

Wealden	Rural/Coastal followed by current East Sussex footprint. Some interest in three-way split and even the four way split.
Rother	Less clear boundary suggestions discussed, but some expressed support for rural/coastal option.
Eastbourne	Less clear boundary suggestions discussed, but some support for rural/coastal split.
Lewes	East Sussex footprint most supported
Hastings	Federated Model, followed by Rural/Coastal split.

Methodology and Limitations

- The focus groups were not representative, and findings cannot be extrapolated into the views of everyone in these areas.
- Only 60 minutes in Eastbourne and Lewes.
- Push back against the identity exercise as people didn't see its relevance. Given time constraints and this push back, the identity exercise was not carried out for all of the focus groups.